

# *A Common Word: Thoughts from Nigeria*

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There is a little story that is largely anecdotal about the difference between heaven and hell. As the story goes, a man wanted to know the scope of the difference between them. Rather than embarking on a long theological discourse, Peter invited the man to witness a meal in both heaven and hell. On the surface, there was no distinction in the setting, cutlery and décor in both places. The man, looking confused could not fathom out why both places should look so similar. *You wait*, Peter told him, *until it is meal time and you will see the difference.*

Lo and behold, the guests began trooping in and taking their seats. The man noticed that the spoons that had been laid on both tables were extraordinarily long. It was impossible to eat with them because each was about six feet long. As they walked around, they noticed that in the first hall, the guests were eating joyfully, chatting and laughing. They were obviously enjoying themselves. They had a strange habit of eating though. They were rather feeding one another instead of feeding themselves. This was because, when they sensed that the spoons before them were too long and they could not feed themselves directly, each guest decided to take the spoon, fetch the food and used it to feed guests who were about six feet away from them and vice versa. They got to the other hall and found the people seated, looking very depressed and gloomily staring at the food before them. The food was getting cold but no one touched any of the cutlery. They discovered that there was no way they could feed themselves with the long spoons. The gentleman turned to Peter and said, *Why are these gentlemen looking sad and not eating?* Peter said: *You see, when those in Heaven found that they could not feed themselves with the spoons, they saw the opportunity of feeding someone else. They thought of others and offered service. Those in hell simply believed that what they could not have, no-one else could have. Heaven is service, putting the other person first, hell is Me and I, and no-one else.*

I think this little anecdote should offer us a good starting point in reviewing and reflecting on the beautiful and prophetic work in the document, *A Common Word (ACW)*, the subject of our reflections. Let

me join millions of men and women of goodwill, to congratulate and thank all those who answered the divine directive to reflect, write and append their signatures to what must be seen definitely as the most inspirational window leading to the arena of dialogue among believers across the world in this new century. The key issues are already in the public domain and most of those gathered here are already experts at least as far as the lofty ideals contained in the document are concerned. As the documents show, many initiatives have already been undertaken to explore these issues further. I commend the many voices of reason that continue to clarify the issues by their arguments and hope that this initiative will build on these efforts to further deepen our commitment to the world of dialogue between our faiths.

My interest and concern is to place these ideals within the context of the Nigerian situation. It is easy for nations in the west with settled democracies and institutions to take so much for granted in discussing some of the issues captured in this initiative. I make this point because the African situation has often been framed in the most condescending and patronising manner with crises and conflicts presented as inevitable outcomes. Some of the old characterisations have not changed even with time. Between our faiths, these tensions are manifested in our perceptions of one another and our faiths. It is important to restate that most of Africa's problems are the result of the cumulative impact of what the African scholar, Professor Basil Davidson referred to as "the curse of the nation state in Africa".<sup>1</sup> Similarly these are the contradictions that have been captured by Professor Ali Mazrui in his epic narrative, which he referred to as a Triple Heritage.<sup>2</sup> In these conversations, we need to proceed with caution. Globalisation has proved to be both an asset and a liability as we can see from its impact in the last twenty or so years since the collapse of communism. In the course of these comments, I will divide my paper into four sections. First I will mention briefly where our nation is coming from historically. Secondly, I will highlight some of the global difficulties that will pose a challenge to us in the course of this initiative. Thirdly and as a corollary, I will look at the internal constraints to the achievement of these ideals in the Nigerian situation. Finally, I will conclude by making a few recommendations.

### **Nigeria: A Brief Background**

What is today modern Nigeria is part of the arbitrary history of British *civilising missions* into the heart of Africa. On the continent, this

encounter left in its wake tales of violence, broken cultures and shattered empires. It is important to note that in the cause of establishing the colonial state, the already existing disparate groups and empires did not have a say in the project. Today the cumulative impact of this contrived unity has been shown in severe pressures imposed on the new states. In the case of Nigeria, the post-colonial elite have continued to tinker with the ethnic behemoth that the British left behind when they brought the Northern and the Southern Protectorates together in 1914. Post-colonial Nigeria has been broken up from its initial three regions, to 12, 19, 21 and now 36 States and a Federal Capital Territory (with additional splinters into 774 Local Government Areas). In Nigeria as elsewhere, the quest for opening up the political space by the creation of new political spaces/states persists as more and more identities continue to emerge. Sadly national integration has been delayed largely because along with cultural and ethnic differences, the fissures further created by both Islam and Christianity have not helped matters. A writer has noted that: "colonialism was built on huge imbalances and staggering chutzpah by an uninvited elite".<sup>3</sup>

Today Nigeria has a population of about 140 million. The computations of the census figures in 2008 avoided the religious or even ethnic affiliations because of the tensions that both categories of identity have continued to elicit from the populace. The issue of the percentage populations between Christians and Muslims remains a source of controversy with both sides making contentious claims. The internationally accepted figures indicate balanced percentages between Christians and Muslims with each hovering above 40%, with a 10% population associated with traditional religions.<sup>4</sup> The history of both Islam and Christianity in Nigeria is very much wrapped up in controversy and indeed, these accounts capture the tensions that still persist until the present. The colonial state was prosecuted by the British, while the missionary project in many parts of Nigeria was undertaken by predominantly Irish missionaries for the Catholic Church and many Protestant groups from Europe. Today it is impossible to discuss the state of Christian-Muslim relations without a proper appreciation of these historical realities. Among the minority ethnic groups in the Middle Belt, Christianity came to be seen as a source of liberation. The British colonial state operated a policy of what it called non-interference, ensuring that the Muslim population was protected from the incursions of missionaries and their adher-

ents. Taken together with the bitter experiences of slavery, conversions, conquests and the imposition of Islamic culture, the scene was seemingly set for the growth of a climate of fear and suspicion. Sadly poor statesmanship, deep corruption and the incursions of the military into the political space, all went a long way towards deepening these prejudices which still persist until the present. Appreciating these difficulties, working at these perceived injustices is important to our pursuit of the ideals of ACW. But let us now turn our attention to the difficulties arising from globalisation and how these have impacted on our efforts towards dialogue.

### **Sowing in a Time of Bad Weather**

Although it is tempting to suggest that these are difficult times to propose dialogue, they are also actually auspicious times to hold a dialogue. The reasons for doubts and fears are many. The conceptual confusion in framing the future of the world after the collapse of Communism further demonstrated how little we knew of one another. The events which came to be known in the words of Francis Fukuyama as "the end of history"<sup>5</sup> may have accelerated the speed of globalisation, but there were other fears that a Pandora's Box may actually have been opened. The world was called upon by Professor Samuel Huntington to gird up its loins and prepare for "a clash of civilizations".<sup>6</sup> Some saw this gloomy picture differently and rather called for "a dialogue of civilizations".<sup>7</sup> While these issues were being debated, the world woke up to the gory event of 11 September 2001 in New York. The rest, as they say, is history and it is not of immediate relevance to our conversation here. However our concern here is the extent to which these developments have created further difficulties for dialogue in our communities.

Even before September 11, our environment has had a long history of conflict and violence over issues relating to the role and place of religion, the status of Islamic law in the Nigerian Constitution etc. September 11 occurred at a time when the Nigerian state itself was rather fragile. It had only just returned to democratic rule in 1999, the 12 Northern States had adopted Shari'a Law, a series of crises had taken place leading to the burning of churches, mass killings, destruction of properties worth hundreds of millions of dollars and so on. While other parts of the country sympathised and saw the attacks as an assault on our common humanity, a substantial

number of members of the Muslim community in Nigeria had sympathies with the goals of Osama Bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda Movement. The question of who was Osama Bin Laden and what he represented became a severe source of tension and friction. An Osama Bin Laden poster was enough to spark off an ugly conflict. Some non-Muslims who had hitherto been engaged in dialogue had their faith challenged by those who argued (*inter alia*): "You see, we told you so. We told you that dialogue with Muslims was impossible. The nature of their global agenda should tell the world what we have been saying. This is a declaration of outright war. Dialogue is a waste of time." On the side of the Muslims, there were a few shrill fanatical voices saying: "Osama's victory is a victory for Islam. We are witnessing the end of a decadent, corrupt, secular civilisation and the beginning of Islamic domination. All Muslims of the world unite."

Although these voices were not coherent in any way, they placed a severe strain on the relationship between Christians and Muslims. They also drew attention to potential threats to the political order. In the middle of this ugly situation was the fate of about 90% of ordinary men and women who simply wanted to be left alone to practise their religion as Christians and Muslims or even just to be left alone. Voices of reason believed that indeed, rather than being an obstacle to dialogue, the new challenges called on men and women of good will to call this devil by its name and to work hard to rid the world of it. Given that Muslims were not spared in the excesses of these criminals, the real challenge then was for the world to seek a platform of solidarity to support our common humanity. Today it is clear that there is a sense of urgency for believers to rescue their faiths from those who threaten them through the misappropriation of their noble teachings; men and women who use legitimate grievances to advance inhuman causes. It is evident that today most of the issues underlining the so-called *war on terror* relate to perceived historical injustices and how to right them. Sadly under the Bush administration, the issues were wrongly framed and thus dialogue became even harder to sustain. Today from the point of our own experiences, a summary of the key issues is as follows:

- A belief that there are historical injustices that are traced to colonialism.
- There is the belief that despite the independence of most nations today, the international system is still not fair to everyone.

- Muslims believe that the persistence of the Palestinian problem is clear evidence that the west is not prepared to act justly towards the weak.
- There is a lingering feeling among a percentage of western non-Muslims that Islam is a force for evil and must be contained.
- There is the fear among Muslims that the non-Muslim world does not understand Islam and is unwilling to accept it fully.
- With the death of ideology, radical Islam believes that it is just a question of time before Islam establishes itself as the dominant world power.

I have made these few observations just to explain why I refer to the challenges before us as akin to *sowing in a time of bad weather*. But, as any good farmer knows, even sowing in bad weather can lead to a good harvest if we tend and water the crops with care and devotion. This is why dialogue remains the only option at least for now. Let us now turn our attention to some of the internal constraints within both faiths in Nigeria and their implications for the objectives in ACW. I will highlight some of these constraints not to provide an excuse but, in my view, to help us appreciate the difficulties that we face locally. After all, to paraphrase the aphorism, as it is said of politics, in the end, *all dialogue is local*.

### **Key Constraints in Christian-Muslim Relations in Nigeria**

First, as I have already mentioned, the processes leading to the emergence of modern Nigeria have been fraught with difficulties. It is my belief, as I have argued elsewhere, that military authoritarian rule exacerbated the tensions between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. Given that the colonial map has come to be associated simplistically with the geography of North-South, discussions about religion in Nigeria have tended to be framed in similar dichotomies, with the North associated with Islam while the South is associated with Christianity. Although this is nothing more than a mere fig leaf hiding some very serious contradictions in the nature of the identity formations in Nigeria, these simplistic categorisations still persist today. Despite the fragmentation of the Nigerian state, these dichotomies still provide a key constraint to Christian-Muslim relations.

A second constraint is the issue of a weak article of association of the various units that make up the Nigerian state, namely a Constitution. The problem of the lack of an acceptable constitutional framework for the regulation of national life has been a major constraint to all Nigerians. This issue has dogged all debates surrounding the status of Shari'a Law in the Nigerian Constitution. And as any casual observer knows, debates around the role and place of Shari'a Law have been the Achilles heel of every constitutional conference, even before independence. For example, ten years after the country's return to civil rule, then as now, the National Assembly has still not been able to review or amend the relevant sections of the Nigerian Constitution. As such, even in a democracy, critics still call it a product of the undemocratic military rulers.

A third issue has been the problem of the corruption of the judicial system in Nigeria. The Constitution has often been the first casualty in military interventions since its suspension is often to be found in the second paragraph of the average coup-plotter's speech.<sup>8</sup> The introduction of Special Military Tribunals has also been a great source of temptation to the judiciary because it has seduced many of its members. Its members were occasionally hand-picked to serve as chairmen under the military and often many of them ended up doing dirty jobs. Very often, they were used by the military to commit judicial murder.<sup>9</sup> The environment of democracy now offers us better prospects and the judiciary has, in many respects, begun to regain its glory by some of its landmark decisions. Tribunals now deal with electoral matters and the judiciary is no longer being used in the way that the military manipulated it.

A fourth constraint concerns uneven access to western education and the attainment of functional literacy between the broad sections of the population. In most states in Northern Nigeria, the level of literacy is below 20%. A combination of factors account for this unfortunate development; for example, there are the lingering suspicions which date back to colonial times to the effect that the acquisition of western education made young Muslims susceptible to conversion to Christianity and the fear of modernisation and its perceived negative impact on the religion. The result is that far too many young people are on the streets as beggars in the name of religion in most Northern cities. They are the reservoir from which the elites draw their thugs and criminals in times of crises. Their poor training or even

outright lack of it has predisposed them to seeing non-Muslims as the *other* and in negative terms.

A fifth constraint is the problem of the lack of an acceptable mechanism for reducing inequalities and ensuring an equitable power-sharing formula across ethnic, religious or regional lines. So far, the present situation lends itself to too much suspicion, creates anxieties and reinforces a climate of fear of domination and allegations of regional, ethnic or religious considerations. Merit suffers and mediocrity is elevated in its place. For example, given its historical experience, Islam has come to be seen as a religion of privilege in Northern Nigeria and it is at the heart of the tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims in the Northern states.<sup>10</sup>

A sixth constraint is the lack of mutual trust among the various religious groups especially at the level of the religious, bureaucratic and political elites. Although this is largely a product of history and lack of adequate conditions and experience in dialogue, the poor political environment and the lack of a culture of the rule of law have exacerbated the problems and led to distrust. Thus rather than serving as platforms for healthy exchange of elite consensus, politics and the bureaucracy often become theatres of war. The political elite often mobilise on the basis of religious sentiments and they also tend to appeal to these sentiments when they perceive that they have been denied access to power or they suffer perceived discrimination.

The next serious question is how do we create a fair society where God's children realise their potential and attain the objectives which Jesus Christ captured well when he said, "I have come that you may have life and have it to the full" (John 10:10). Obviously, as long as there is inequality in any society, especially when it is based on a perceived classification or identity, we cannot talk of being children of one God, created in his image and likeness and meant to be the objects of his love. So how should we work towards ending injustice and creating a much fairer society that does not discriminate against some sections or members of the population? We may have dwelt on religion or ethnicity, but other equally potent categories of discrimination include gender, social standing, disability, etc. Let us now turn our attention to the prospects for the creation of a fair society befitting God's children and in keeping with the ideals and goals of ACW.



## **Ingredients for the Common Good**

It is important to note that although there may not be one antidote to the unfortunate spiral of intolerance and the persistence of violence that is often motivated by religious claims, it is important to turn our attention to how we might actually reverse the ugly spread of this virus of intolerance based on prejudices in our society. It is safe to say that whether it is called good governance, justice, fairness, equity or whatever, we can use one expression to capture these sentiments: the Common Good.

As a policy and a strategy, the Common Good seeks to do what it says, namely ensure the welfare and wellbeing of the majority of the population. A nation that ensures the pursuit of the Common Good will exhibit the following characteristics:

- Guarantee of a safe haven for the weakest in the society.
- Create a platform that ensures access to justice by all.
- Create a system that favours and promotes security of the family.
- Create a culture of tolerance.
- Ensure programmes that promote public welfare.
- Promote peaceful co-existence and harmony.
- Encourage and promote freedom of expression.

In theory, most of these ideals have been well-captured in the relevant sections of our National Constitution. Chapter Two of the said Constitution, under a section known as "Fundamental Objective and Directive Principles of State Policy", captures most of these objectives. A random selection of the relevant sub-sections reveals the following claims:

- The Federal Republic of Nigeria shall be a State based on the principles of democracy and social justice.
- The composition of the Government of a State, a local government council, or any of the agencies of such Government or council, and the conduct of the affairs of the Government or council or such agencies shall be carried out in such manner as to recognise the diversity of the people within its area of authority and the need to promote a sense of belonging and loyalty among all the people of the Federation.

- Accordingly, national integration shall be actively encouraged, whilst discrimination on the grounds of place of origin, sex, religion, status, ethnic or linguistic association or ties shall be prohibited.
- For the purpose of promoting national integration, it shall be the duty of the State to:
  - Provide adequate facilities for and encourage free mobility of people, goods and services throughout the Federation.
  - Secure full residence rights for every citizen in all parts of the Federation.
  - Encourage inter-marriage among persons from different places of origin, or of different religious, ethnic or linguistic association or ties; and
  - Promote or encourage the formation of associations that cut across ethnic, linguistic, religious and/or other sectional barriers.
- The State shall foster a feeling of belonging and of involvement among the various people of the Federation, to the end that loyalty to the nation shall override sectional loyalties.
- The State shall, within the context of the ideals and objectives for which provisions are made in this Constitution:
  - Harness the resources of the nation and promote national prosperity and an efficient, a dynamic and self-reliant economy;
  - Control the national economy in such manner as to secure the maximum welfare, freedom and happiness of every citizen on the basis of social justice and equality of status and opportunity.<sup>11</sup>

In real life however, these provisions of the Constitution are lived more in theory than in practice. As a whole, this has reduced the quality of life of citizens to various conditions of poverty and misery. In their daily lives, the people have no shelter, they have no education, they have no adequate food, they remain vulnerable to diseases, they live in squalor, and so on. It is in this ocean of neglect that the viruses of violence reside. Nigerians live daily with these frustrations and it is their cumulative impact that leads commentators to speak about *religious* or *communal* crises in Nigeria. As a review of any of the reports of the government committees set up often to review these incidents will show, the root causes of these crises are often social discontentment by various segments of the society. Religion provides an appropriate tool to which to appeal to mobilise and channel this discontentment, largely because it is easy to identify it as the basis of privilege or disadvantage. Among the non-Muslim population in the Northern States, religious identity is often considered a major

category of privilege or disadvantage, with Islam trumping others as a major identity of privilege. Although more often than not, the allegations are not what they seem, the presence of some of the constraints I have mentioned above does not help matters. Therefore, to address and reverse the issues as to why so-called religious or communal violence persists in Nigeria, it is important to appreciate the aphorism, *a hungry man is an angry man*. What are the options for future dialogue? It is to this that we shall now turn by way of conclusion.

### **Options: Life Should Be Beautiful**

The award-winning film, *Life is Beautiful*, tells the story of the survival of an Italian family that was caught up in the throes of the Second World War. Captured with his family and having been separated from his wife in the concentration camp, the man has to try to build a protective shield around his little five-year-old child from the trauma of life in the camp. It is indeed a beautiful story that tries to make the best out of a terribly bad situation. The question is: Do we all have a common view of what constitutes happiness? What would a world of perfect love look like? A major constraint for us is to appreciate the fact that all of us see happiness differently and will have to subscribe to an inverted form of the Tolstonian aphorism that: *All happy families are happy differently*. However we as believers have a common understanding and a set of principles which have been highlighted in ACW. We are all created by God, a God who is love. His love has been mediated to us through Prophets whom we all acknowledge, no matter how we may differ in ranking them. We also believe that this God has created each and every one of us differently and that he has plans for all his children. All of us admit of the centrality of the human person as the highest expression of this love. We also agree that after this life, there is another one, a life that is eternal. We also agree that there will be judgment and that good will be rewarded while evil will be punished. We also agree that each and every one of us will account for what they have done and merit a place with God or a place outside of God. There is a broad understanding around all these issues. The problem is posed by three questions. First of all, what obligations do we have to one another while we are here on earth? Secondly, what obligations do we have to the powers that control the space around which we function, powers into whose hands God has entrusted our lives and our earthly future? In other

words, what obligation do we have to the state and those who govern it? Thirdly, how should we regulate our lives in relation to these two authorities: one that is earthly and finite and the other that is infinite and eternal? Who should mediate and what powers should he or she have? In other words, should the domain of Caesar and that of God be separated or is there a meeting point (Matt. 22:21)?

These are deep philosophical and theological questions. It would be helpful if we enjoyed cultural, religious or ethnic homogeneity. But the reality is that we are living in an environment where there are believers and those who do not believe, all making similar or sometimes contending and conflicting claims. This is where the issues raised here become important and significant. This is why this initiative is so important. I will make a few propositions.

First, I think it is important that we restate the issues regarding the sacredness and sanctity of life, our individual rights and human freedom as have been set out in the secular doctrines surrounding religious liberty and human rights. The Catholic Church for example has dealt with this issue in the document known as *Dignitatis Humanae*.<sup>12</sup> In paragraph two, the document speaks about *religious freedom* as a *human right* which should finally become a *civil right*. The central theme here is to ensure that no human agency, state or religious authority coerces an individual to act contrary to his or her conscience in matters relating to faith, whether in public or in private. Now in the Nigerian Constitution, there are adequate provisions for the realisation of these lofty objectives. The relevant provisions are to be found under Chapter Four, entitled: Fundamental Rights. Here the Constitution devotes eleven sections to dealing with various aspects of human rights and human dignity such as: the sanctity of life, freedom from discrimination, rights to private and family life, rights to own property, rights to personal liberty, right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and right to freedom of religion, among others.<sup>13</sup> The realities in our daily lives however are different in our situation.

Everyone has a right to religious freedom because the pursuit of a good life is at the heart of why we are here on earth. However, whereas there are those who see this life as an end in itself, those who are believers have the faith that, as Jim Reeves said, "This world is not my home, I am just passing through". Those who have faith

and practise a religion believe that religion is their guide to their lives here and the life hereafter. Religion offers them a road map which they must try to follow faithfully if they are to reach their destination. How this map is read, how it is understood, constitutes a problem in a society where there are other maps and map readers. With old and modern prophets, the clerical classes claim the right to be map readers and then offer guidance to their adherents. How this map reading is conducted has often been the subject of serious controversy, intolerance and violence over the years. The boundaries of individual freedom have often not been respected as some clerics believe that they have a duty to enforce the will of God even here on earth. On the other hand, there are those who do not have a faith in God or anything at all, those for whom this world is an end and who treat religion and the thought of another life with suspicion and doubt. If they had their way, there would be no mention of religion and as we know, these people have been with us from the beginning of time. How should they co-exist in one environment, under the same laws, facing the same challenges, struggling for and defending their rights to be what they want to be without any molestation or discrimination? An attempt at answering these questions will be the final part of this paper.

First for us as Christians, the love that God has freely given to us is unconditional. This love does not depend on our performance or even response or acknowledgement. Even in the midst of the worst form of sin, God does not withdraw his love from us. The story of the criminal who has come to be known as the good thief demonstrates that until we breathe our last, God still follows us offering us this unconditional love (Lk. 23:43). It is because of the exceptional nature of this love that Jesus calls it a new commandment (Jn. 13:34). It was a love that had no precedent. In leaving his apostles, he commanded them to love one another. It is instructive that Jesus makes his love a command: it is not an exhortation, a plea, a request, or a sympathetic appeal. Jesus knew that on their own, his followers would not be able to live up to these ideals. This love will be eternal because he is the vine and we his followers are the branches (Jn. 15:3). He gave them a guarantee by sending them the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth as their guide and their succour (Jn. 15:26).

There are many lessons arising from this, namely that Jesus distinguishes the love of God, which is self-giving ("a man can have no

greater love”), non-discriminatory, does not falter, etc. For us as human beings, our love is more or less the opposite: we withhold it when we are hurt, we withdraw it when it is not reciprocated, we weigh the benefits as they affect us, etc.

Second, we must note the supremacy of God the creator over us humans. God’s patience with us, his respect for our freedom and so on, are lessons for us to learn, namely that we must not impose the will of God on our neighbours. A situation where clerics and other followers turn themselves into God’s policemen, advocates and judges is contrary to the will of God himself. This does not mean that we should not take seriously our duty to correct, reprimand and guide. Indeed, we need to take those duties seriously and ensure that we are seeking to make others better members of our religious families, not to turn them away.

Further the most pressing issue facing many developing nations is the issue of how best to redress inequalities and reverse the discrimination against citizens on the basis of religion, region, ethnicity or class. It is clear that despite the lofty pronouncements in our constitutions, the real problem is how best to ensure access to justice through the provision of mechanisms to ensure that aggrieved citizens can pursue their cases and causes without threats. To this end, I propose the setting up of a Citizens Equality Commission, which will be given the duty of ensuring that citizens who allege breaches of their rights on the basis of identifiable claims of discrimination can table their grievances to that body. This is akin to the Commission for Racial Equality in the United Kingdom. This platform is important because whereas rulers make declarations of good intentions, these will be of no use if they cannot be enforced. The existence of this platform will help actualise the famous dictum: “he who alleges must prove”! But beyond litigation, voices of authority such as religious, traditional or youth groups need to form alliances and forums and be ready to stand together for one another. The fact that we are *majorities* somewhere, whether as Muslims, Christians, men, women or youth, does not foreclose the fact that we are *minorities* somewhere else.

Third, there is the need to rethink the role and place of religious laws in a plural society such as ours. While respecting the rights of citizens to practise and live under the dictates of their religions, it is important that Nigerians be shielded from the excesses of zealots and fanatics

who use religion to perpetrate criminal acts or settle personal scores. To this end, where the Constitution guarantees citizens the freedom to marry across religions or ethnic lines, convert or change their faith without let or hindrance, it is necessary for the laws to provide enough protection so as to enable citizens to claim these rights. So-called "blasphemy laws" have no place in our plural and democratic society because they fly in the face of the same constitutional provisions and a constitution cannot contradict itself. Those who perceive that their faiths have been slandered should pursue their claims through the competent civil courts. Any citizen who takes the law into his or her hands and commits arson or murder in the name of religion should be tried and sentenced according to the relevant laws. Such criminality has nothing to do with religion and it is important to make the distinction.

Fourth, whereas religious liberty exists in our laws, the Federal Government must think more clearly over how to ensure that religious bodies and groups live under the same laws. Thus the relationship between religious bodies and the State in areas of the provision of education for example, needs to be more clearly thought through. Whereas some Muslims believe that Islam does not admit of separation between church and state, the reality is that a nation cannot live in both a democracy and theocracy at the same time. Democracies survive on the threshold of clear secular claims and objectives. The *secularity* of the state is not the same as the pursuit or promotion of *secularism* as some people wrongly think. Secularity protects religion from the pressures and manipulation of the State while secularism as a philosophy rejects religion and the sacred. The secularity of the state enables the state to perform its functions free from religious pressures while religion enjoys the opportunity to speak truth to power and play its prophetic role of being the voice of the voiceless.

Finally, our nation must move quickly but steadily towards pursuing the ideals of living under and enforcing the rule of law. Democracy offers us the best platform for achieving this through the formation of alliances based on political party membership, civil society and community associations, which will in the long run, make the ideals enshrined in ACW easier to attain. The new challenges posed by the war on terror have moral dimensions but they also touch on our collective sins of omission. We have expended energy fighting to defend our territories and in the process, we left the moral high ground open.

It has now been occupied by opportunists who have no agenda beyond the perpetration of evil against imaginary enemies that they create as they go along. The call for human solidarity is urgent now more than ever before. We may have reached the point now that the late Revd Martin Luther King meant when, in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, he said: "There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the blackness of corroding despair".<sup>14</sup> The time is now and before us lies an open grave. We know the way, what is needed now is the will. For, as the old saying goes, "If not us, who? and if not now, when?"

- 1| *Basil Davidson: The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation State, London: Times Books, 1992.*
- 2| *Ali Mazrui: The Africans: A Triple Heritage, New York. Little Brown & Co., 1986.*
- 3| *Alan Cowell: Colonialism Left Scars Still Unhealed, International Herald Tribune, 23-24 May 2009, p2.*
- 4| *John Paden: Faith and Politics in Nigeria, New York. Institute of Peace Press. 2008.*
- 5| *Francis Fukuyama: The End of History and the Last Man, New York: Free Press, 1992.*
- 6| *Samuel Huntington: The Clash of Civilisations, Foreign Affairs, Summer, 1993. Later the same year, he published the book version of the essay under the title, The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of the World Order, London: Simon & Schuster, 1997.*
- 7| *This initiative was conceptualised by Mohammed Khatami, the former President of Iran, to counter the clash of civilisation thesis of Professor Huntington. The United Nations was enthused by the idea and declared 2001 as the year of Dialogue Among Civilisations.*
- 8| *Dan Agbese: Fellow Nigerians: Turning Points in the Political History of Nigeria, Ibadan: Umbrella Books, 2000.*
- 9| *The trial of Ken Saro Wiwa and his nine Ogoni kinsmen through one of these kangaroo tribunals in 1995 was referred to as judicial murder by the then Prime Minister of the UK, Mr John Major.*
- 10| *Matthew Kukah: Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria, Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1992.*
- 11| *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Lagos: Federal Government Printer, 1999, Ch 2.*
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